



**Review: [Untitled]**

Reviewed Work(s):

*The Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach*

Harriet R. Polt

*Film Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No. 2. (Winter, 1968 - Winter, 1969), pp. 55-56.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0015-1386%28196824%2F196924%2921%3A2%3C55%3ATCOAMB%3E2.0.CO%3B2-K>

*Film Quarterly* is currently published by University of California Press.

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/ucal.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

---

The JSTOR Archive is a trusted digital repository providing for long-term preservation and access to leading academic journals and scholarly literature from around the world. The Archive is supported by libraries, scholarly societies, publishers, and foundations. It is an initiative of JSTOR, a not-for-profit organization with a mission to help the scholarly community take advantage of advances in technology. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

they will no longer have any true individuality of style or feeling.

This is, I hope, an unwarranted surmise. But when men like Losey and Gary, with the freedom to do what they can do best, decide to do what they can do only badly, hope doesn't come easy.—WILLIAM JOHNSON

## Short Notices

*Bullitt* is slick, tough, and entertaining if you don't try to make sense of the plot. Audiences today want sensations, not logical structures, and at least *Bullitt* delivers some of the kicks that it promises—a car chase over San Francisco's hills, and a cat-and-mouse game between moving planes at the San Francisco airport are among the most dazzling action sequences on recent celluloid. William Fraker's photography is splashy and dynamic, and the director, Peter Yates, has an unusual eye for detail. He lets several apparently irrelevant scenes run much longer than we expect; at first I thought his timing was off, but then I began to admire his attempts to challenge the rules of the genre. We expect thrillers to be tight and fast, but this one is often eerily distended. When the hero visits an elegant Nob Hill party what might have been only an atmospheric bit in another film reveals character in this one; the scene goes on long enough to make *Bullitt's* distaste for aristocratic pretension palpable and painful. Yates absorbs us in the machinery and language of hospital operating rooms and morgues, forcing us to look at much more than we *want* to see, refusing to cut away—like more fastidious moviemakers—from the methodical, gruesome routines of men who trade in death. And in the car chase Yates traps us in those cars, on city hills and country roads and freeways, until we can feel the excitement, the claustrophobia, the insanity of the automobile with sudden, therapeutic clarity. I don't want to make this film sound important—it's basically conventional and empty-headed, and when it tries for a "meaningful" scene, like the one in which the hero's girlfriend gives a little speech about his callousness, it's thoroughly ridiculous. But if you do happen to see *Bullitt*, it has a few minor rewards.

—STEPHEN FARBER

*The Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach* is one of the year's most daring films, yet on the surface, it is among the least spectacular—eschewing color, fast cutting, topical references, zooms, flashbacks, and all the other trimmings of the most "advanced" of the films of the sixties. As noted by other critics, it is primarily a film about the *music* of Bach, rather than about the man himself. One aspect of the film's daring lies in its relentless presentation of whole works or at least whole movements of Bach's works rather than the usual snippets. (The performances, one may add, are both exquisite and restrained). If the *Chronicle*, however, were simply a record of performances, one would hardly need a film; and the daring of director Jean-Marie Straub (with co-director Danièle Straub-Huillet, his wife) is as much visual as auditory. Straub dares to hold the camera still and to force us to *look*. The entire film contains only some 100 shots, about one tenth of the usual number for a film its length. Far from being boring, the long-held shots give us time to observe the period costumes, instruments, settings, even original documents. Most of the long shots as well as many closer ones are taken at an angle. The angles themselves as well as the restless curve of the Baroque interiors give such a strong impression of movement that I was several times surprised to realize that the camera had not actually moved at all. Also adding to the impression of movement are the backgrounds: usually a large window or a round or oval-framed picture, which draws the eye to the rear of the composition. But of course there *is* movement within the individual shots, though always of a slow and subtle kind. Hands move on harpsichord and organ keys, and one remarkable shot shows feet moving over the organ pedals. There are slow dollies to the main point of interest, or from a soloist to embrace a group. Or a seemingly static frame will contain small but significant movements, such as the lovely scene of Anna Magdalena sitting at her spinet with her little girl quietly playing in front of it. It is perfectly appropriate for the images to be understated, in keeping with the understatement of Anna Magdalena's journal itself, parts of which are read (in an almost toneless voice) between and occasionally during the musical selections. From listening to Anna Magdalena's account one gets the impression of a man and woman facing with unshakeable stoicism some of the worst calamities that life can bring—illness, failure, and death of children, disfavor with employers and punishment for the assertion of one's rights, sickness, near-blindness, death. Anna Magdalena (Bach's second wife) al-

most casually slips mention of these disasters into her chronicle of married life. The acting is equally understated. All of the actors are real musicians—the notable harpsichordist Gustav Leonhardt plays a rather lean and dour Johann Sebastian, and Christiane Lang plays his wife—and none of them pretends to be anything other than what they are. Nor, however, do they look uncomfortable in their curled wigs and ruffles. The film, in short, has the calm and grandeur of much of Bach's music. An initially perplexing shot, twice repeated, of waves breaking against a shore was explained to me when I learned that Beethoven once said of Bach: "*Das ist kein Bach, das ist ein Meer*" ("That is no brook, that is an ocean"—with another possible pun on the word *Meer*, which is also a homophone for *mehr*, more). The quotation is appropriate to a film which presents, without any resort to trickery or modishness, a man, his time, and above all his music in a way that is both faithful and touching. It is a film to be seen many times.—HARRIET R. POLT

**The Firemen's Ball.** When one gets through laughing at absolutely every character and situation in Miloš Forman's third feature film (also known as *Like a House on Fire*), one realizes that, far from being benignly humorous, the film depicts and satirizes most of mankind's unbeautiful traits, as well as many of the natural disasters that flesh is heir to. Practically plotless, *Fireman's Ball* deals with the attempts by a fire brigade of a small Czech mountain town to stage a dance, honor their pitiful, ancient ex-chief, choose a pretty queen of the ball, hold a raffle, and finally extinguish a fire which consumes the house of another pitiful old man. Despite multiple disasters, the party is a success: almost everyone has a good time. But the queen candidates, partly through sheer luck and partly through bribery, turn out to be the homeliest, most squirmy and unpoised girls of the town; the raffle prizes are stolen (one—a large headcheese—by the wife of the firechief, who brings disgrace on the brigade by being discovered in the act of trying to return it). Efforts to raise money for the old man whose house has burned are unsuccessful, and he is offered instead the box full of raffle tickets for the stolen prizes—at which he bitterly observes, "But I need money, not pieces of paper!" The old chief, forgotten in the *melée*, is finally discovered after all the guests have left, patiently waiting to claim his prize—a box supposed to contain a gilt fireaxe. It has also been stolen, but the old man has too much pride to let on that the box is empty, and only the audience shares his secret.

All along we are exposed to a rich collection of human foibles—lechery, greed, pride, gluttony, envy—as well as natural disasters—fires, of course, and stupidity, ugliness, and sickness (the firemen, in their pre-party planning session, matter-of-factly state that the old chief has cancer and won't live to see another ball). The two old men, one heart-breakingly tactful, the other just as plainly frank, come off both best and worst. Though they alone have both honesty and dignity, no humiliation is spared them: at the fire, the burned-out man sits on a chair in the snow watching his house burn to the ground. Someone suggests turning him around so that he won't have to watch; someone else, noting that he is dressed only in pajamas, observes that he may be cold. The logical solution, suggested by yet another helpful bystander, is of course to move him closer to the fire! As in Forman's earlier *Loves of a Blonde*, some episodes are carried too far. Forman doesn't seem to know when we have had enough of a joke, and the film would benefit from further editing. Yet for the most part it all works, and this tragicomedy has more lasting impact than would pure comedy. Forman treats the failings and misfortunes of human beings with the sardonic wit that we have come to expect of the Czechoslovakian film makers of the sixties. Whether their recent financial and popular success, and the more recent (and more lamentable) reoccupation of their homeland will change their films for the worse, yet remains to be seen.—HARRIET R. POLT

**For The Love Of Ivy.** It is the outlandishness of the idea of black people cavorting in one of those stud-chases-virgin sex comedies that makes *Ivy* worthy of mention. Certainly, no reasonable person would challenge the assertion that the American sex comedy is one of the most appalling creations of recent decades. Why, then, with so many important themes aching to be explored, would black stars make forays into a worthless genre like the sex comedy? Screenwriter Robert Alan Auerth is less to blame than Sidney Poitier, who created the storyline, somehow convincing himself and producers that the black people of America needed this. I am certain that I speak for the majority of my fellow black Americans in suggesting that Poitier cease deluding himself that cinematic debris such as this is beneficial to the black cause. Actually, it is flattery to even categorize this as a comedy, since few of the incidents and jokes rate more than a begrudging chuckle. The plot concerns a live-in black maid, Ivy (Abbey Lincoln), who threatens to leave her long-time employers,